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## **DO STUDENTS LEARN TO SPEAK SPANISH IN OUR HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE LANGUAGE CLASSES?**

I have purposely put the title of this article in the form of a question, and I can hear my readers, doubtless without exception, answer with a loud and emphatic: NO! Now change the word Spanish to French, German, Italian, what you will, and then compare the answers. We, as teachers of Spanish, are no worse off than our associates in the modern language field. But there's the rub. We want to excel. As members of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish we are banded together for our common good and for the good of our students. We desire to do the best kind of teaching that is humanly possible in order to produce results of which we can be proud.

Granted that we all confess frankly that a student can not learn Spanish (or any other foreign language) in our classrooms so as to be able to speak it fluently. Of course I am speaking generally now and do not include the occasional exception who proves the rule. Let us look into the matter from one angle, at least, in a sort of analytical manner in order to determine if possible on whom to place the burden of the blame. Let us imagine a class composed of twenty students which meets five times a week, the length of each period being forty-five minutes. If each student actually speaks or reads in the foreign language for two minutes each day (a fair estimate and perhaps a trifle too high), then in the course of a year of 180 school days he has used the language in the classroom a total of 360 minutes: six actual hours! Not more time than some children might consume in conversing in their mother tongue between the hours of sunrise and sunset. Proceeding at that rate the span of life is too short for anyone to learn to speak a foreign language in the classroom.

The teacher of a living foreign tongue has a more difficult task confronting him than any that Hercules ever attempted if he is expected to turn out graduates who have a real command of the language that they are studying. The foregoing analysis does not place the blame on either student or teacher. But the task is not as hopeless as these figures would make it seem, for there are degrees of knowledge and of perfection in language work. When a student

in an examination in elementary Spanish receives a grade of ninety per cent we do not mean that he knows ninety per cent of all Spanish. We mean that he knows ninety per cent of the subject known as elementary Spanish—itself only a small fraction of the whole subject. Following this same principle we can readily see that because a student does not become proficient in a language after studying it in school does not signify that his time has been wasted. It is really ridiculous to imagine that our students—the school children of America—are ever going to become bi-lingual. Why, even under the most ideal conditions (in or out of school) one can not become truly bi-lingual, because one can not live in two countries at the same time. Language is an animate thing. Words are born, grow, mature, and fall into decay. After a native Frenchman, Spaniard or what-not has resided for a time in a foreign land he finds on his return home that his mother tongue has changed somewhat. New words, new turns of speech, colloquialisms, strike his ear but are meaningless to him. Consequently he finds that he must "brush up" his own language. In the light of the foregoing surely no one should be so deluded as to expect that a student will learn in the classroom to speak a language like a native.

The consensus of opinion also seems to be that more success is obtained in language work in the high school and junior high school than in the university and the college. There are plausible and apparently sound reasons for such an opinion and condition. The young student is invariably more sincere in his work than his older brother is wont to be. The high-school pupil is asked by his friends: What are you studying? The college or university student is asked: What are you taking? The high-school pupil invariably makes some effort to learn, while the college student all too frequently "takes" a subject because it is necessary for graduation. Moreover, although the high-school pupil has his distractions in the form of organized athletics, wholesome play and near-social events, his age is in his favor. His mind is more plastic, more receptive and more retentive. Create in him an interest in his subject and he "registers" every time. Herein enters the cleverness of the ingenious teacher. An inspiring teacher will obtain excellent results. The pupil will soon want more than the meager work of the classroom. Newspapers in Spanish, clubs, the presentation of plays in Spanish, realia of any kind, all will help to satisfy his desire for knowledge of Spanish and thereby supple-

ment the limited work of the classroom. We are all familiar with the many advantages which participation in a foreign language play offers. The participants unconsciously increase their vocabulary, gain a respect for and an appreciation of the spoken idiom as a means of expressing thought. Such work, too, is occasionally the open sesame of foreign dramatic literature. All extra-mural work of this kind is in reality so much additional study, taken in homeopathic doses, which supplements the formal work of the classroom in a wholesome and beneficial way. But it requires skill and ingenuity on the part of the teacher to keep his classes keyed up to a high pitch of interest at all times. There can be no perfunctory teaching in language work if a satisfactory high standard is ever to be reached and maintained. We are justified in making the statement which all have heard so often that teachers of languages in our schools need the finest kind of preparation. The perfect teacher probably does not exist, probably never has existed, for after all we are only human, and *humanum est errare*. However, we can all strive to approach perfection.

Book learning alone is insufficient as preparation for teaching a foreign language. The graduate departments of our universities turn out men and women who have fulfilled all the requirements exacted by their faculties. They know a great deal, have amassed a storehouse of knowledge, but how often it occurs that they can not converse with any degree of fluency in the foreign language which has been their specialty and which they intend to teach. At the last meeting of the central division of the Modern Language Association a committee appointed to prepare a statement on foreign study offered through its chairman the following resolution, which was adopted:

*Resolved*, That candidates for the doctorate in romance languages should be urged to spend at least one year, or the equivalent, in study abroad; and that whenever possible, such study should be made an integral part of the preparation for the doctor's degree and for the career of teacher of romance languages and literatures.

The virtues of the foregoing resolution are obvious. The general adoption of such a policy will be a long stride in the right direction.

We Anglo-Saxons are not quick at acquiring a foreign language. Some of us struggle on for years with a faulty pronunciation. Should we, then, in the interest of things Hispanic, call upon native Spaniards and Spanish-Americans to be the teachers of our youth in secondary schools? I do not feel qualified to answer definitely, but there are cer-

tain points which must be taken into consideration. The Latin who has grown up in his native land does not comprehend the workings of our school system and finds it difficult to envisage the problems of teaching in the same way as we do. Discipline, or rather the lack of discipline, which is not absent from our secondary school classes, is an almost unsurmountable obstacle in his path. Unless he is familiar with student slang and the colloquial idiom undue advantage will be taken of him, and his efforts, however sincere they may be, will come to naught. There is a definite place for the Spanish-speaking native when he is thoroughly cognizant of our language, customs, methods, and civilization. To be successful he must, of course, know how to teach Spanish from the standpoint of the American. There is unquestionably a definite place for the native Spaniard in institutions where courses are given entirely in the foreign idiom, but I am frank to state that unless he is dealing with mature students or is in a department which is guided by an American the inexperienced foreigner is very apt to prove inefficient, owing in the main to the perverseness of our youth.

Since we do not teach by the direct method alone we must expect the foreigner who teaches elementary classes to be able to approach his subject analytically, with a knowledge of the machinery of language—grammar. He ought, too, to have some clear conception of pedagogical principles. Because one is a native Spaniard and has spoken the language at home is not an adequate reason why one is qualified to teach the language. Let me quote here a few words which could have been inserted earlier in this article. They are doubtless trite and commonplace, but truthful. "En la enseñanza, no basta saber, sino saber enseñar. Un hombre puede ser el más sabio del mundo y ser péssimo profesor." (*España*, Madrid, April 29, 1922, p. 5.) We should not at any time consider the teaching profession as a catch-all for failures, disappointed ones, temporary workers and the like if we have the welfare of the profession at heart.

The young, inexperienced American teacher who has chosen teaching as his life work enters the field under a handicap, and the first to suffer, unfortunately, are his students. But we all know that the best way to learn is to teach. Herein lies the salvation of a vital part of the teaching profession, provided the instructor is sincere and strives earnestly to progress. The new teacher soon finds himself equipped with a handy list of stock phrases in the foreign language which he

manipulates with some ease, and perhaps grace, in the classroom. So far, so good, but a teacher must not be content until he feels at home in discussing any normal topic in Spanish. It is true that if in an elementary class we hold close to the lesson we find ourselves employing a minimum amount of Spanish and yet seem to be conducting the work in the foreign tongue. Once the teacher has his first stock of set expressions well in hand and continues to use them over and over again, both he and the class soon find that the day's work lacks variety, and an atmosphere of musty monotony pervades the classroom. When such a condition exists it is obvious that perfunctory and disinterested teaching has been reached and the result is also obvious—a stultification of all concerned. Little wonder that students reciting a maximum of two minutes a day learn little in such a class.

Until the Spanish classes in our schools are manned by masters of the language, by teachers who really have a fair command of the colloquial idiom, are we not wasting time in insisting upon our students learning to speak Spanish? I feel that this question can best be answered by another. Since we as an association of teachers of Spanish are frank to admit that many who teach are not masters of the language, would not an affirmative answer to the preceding question be a confession of defeat, an admission that our fathers and grandfathers in the profession were working along sound pedagogical lines when they taught living languages in precisely the same way as their colleagues taught the dead languages? I believe so. There are some weaknesses which can be strengthened, others which must continue to remain despite our best efforts, but we all feel that we are urging young teachers to follow close to the best and correct path, a smooth path without ruts. Far be it from any of the older and more experienced teachers in their smug self-satisfaction to discourage any loyal worker in the profession. The real purpose of our association should be to encourage all teachers to continue studying, to seek to perfect their knowledge of the subject they are teaching. One is never too old to learn something more. Some may think that we are pessimistic when we cry out against weaknesses in the profession. I think we do so because we are proud. We desire to ennable the teaching of language in our schools. Jealousy does not enter into the discussion, for surely teaching does not stand as a symbol of wealth. It represents more often altruistic service. Nevertheless

the comforts and luxuries of life come in greater abundance to him who is ambitious. Here is one explanation of why the best secondary school teachers are found in the larger cities where salaries are paid more or less commensurate with the teacher's ability.

If we confront the situation fairly we are still forced to admit that even the poorly equipped beginner in teaching does not labor in vain. The members of his class are guided by textbooks and grammars, and even when the spoken language falls into the background all is not lost. It is a well-established fact that our students who have studied Spanish grammar and translated some pages of Spanish prose make progress in the language faster and with greater accuracy in a Spanish-speaking country than do those who learn the language parrot-like with no knowledge of grammar. In whatever way a student approaches the subject he is bound to derive some benefit from it. The vital question is how to derive the greatest benefit in a given time.

When so many people are ready to cry out that the student does not learn to speak Spanish in the classroom, are they ready to admit with justice and without prejudice the possibility of cultural value which is derived from a study of the literature? Probably many of them are not, because they are so infatuated with "lo positivo" that they have lost all conception of perspective. Nevertheless, language study in our schools does possess a cultural value, and the broad-minded admit the fact. Our detractors, too, will say that Spain—glorious Spain—holds little for us to admire; a country rich only in poverty, a minor power in world affairs, a land of *mañana*, of ease and idleness. Why should we, they will ask, consider merely the glory that was Spain's when we have other flourishing lands and peoples in which to be interested. We all know what replies to give such a question. I believe that it was Professor Santayna who, while at Harvard University, said that Spain's former excellence and supremacy were due in part to the fact that those qualities for which she is famed were then in vogue throughout the world. In this age of materialism those same qualities are no longer the fashion, but, who knows? some day they may again become the world's fashion and the glory that was Spain's will return. A noble envisaging of the situation by a noble philosopher. Perhaps we who admire Spain are blind, but love, too, is blind.

We are constantly obliged, especially in our colleges and universities, to deal with disinterested students, students who are "taking the

course for credit." They are a problem unto themselves, a problem which the secondary school teacher does not have to deal with in any such numbers as the college teacher does. Such students must be driven, and driven hard. Elementary language study should be considered seriously; no leniency should be shown the delinquents and shirkers. If we must convert ourselves into slave drivers, let us do so with a vim when it shall be for the good of the profession and the benefit of our students. In spite of such drastic action, teacher and class can coöperate and work effectively together.

If it is granted that the time spent in the classroom is not sufficient for a student to acquire a speaking knowledge of a foreign language, then it is absurd to attempt, by the direct method or otherwise, to teach only the spoken idiom. It is likewise absurd to neglect the spoken idiom entirely and fall back upon an antiquated method which has proved a failure. A golden mean must be chosen—some grammar, some translation, some literature, some conversation, and the like.

My readers may feel that all this discussion leads to naught. Perhaps it does. It should be borne in mind, however, that we are dealing with an intangible subject. We as teachers of Spanish feel that something is wrong, but we don't know exactly what. I have endeavored to point out that no one is entirely to blame and yet that all are partly to blame: teacher, student, and even the school system. We do have a problem, and we, the teachers, are doubtless more vitally concerned than anyone else. If we love our work, are bigger and broader than our subject, are sincere and effective, and strive to produce results of which we can be proud, then the first step toward the solution of our "problem" will have been taken.

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